

Organizing School Forums on the National Issues to Be Voted On

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OBJECTIVES

Forums to discuss national issues will help students to:

1. think objectively and critically about politics and current issues.¹
2. understand citizens' rights to differences of opinion.²
3. cast an informed vote (in the mock election and later in real elections) based on a solid informational foundation about the election issues and candidates' positions on the issues.
4. improve comprehension and debating skills.³
4. enhance planning and organizational skills.
6. involve family and community members in school activities.

METHODS

Although voters rarely have the opportunity to vote on national issues, discussing the issues and each candidate's position on the issues (perhaps via an issues forum) is an ideal way to enhance knowledgeable participation in the electoral process.

The necessary ingredients for producing a successful issues forum are explained below. Although the list is sequential, you may not proceed exactly in this order.

1. Research issues and candidates.
2. Determine the scope of your forum.
3. Pick a date.
4. Pick a place.
5. Assess your resources.

★ According to a survey conducted by *The Washington Post*, the Kaiser Foundation, and Harvard University, of those questioned:

- ★ two-thirds did not know the name or party affiliation of the representative from their congressional district.
- ★ 40% could not correctly name the Vice President.
- ★ two-thirds did not know the name of the U.S. Senate majority leader.
- ★ almost half (46%) could not name the Speaker of the House.

Public discussions of current political issues and candidates, such as school forums, can help reverse that trend among America's future voters.

1. The new National Standards for Civics and Government suggest that students be knowledgeable of many concepts related to civics and government including American political culture, liberalism, and republicanism, and conflicts among values and principles in American politics. Student discussions of election issues can be broadened to include how the issues affect students directly as well as how the issues harmonize or conflict with the American concept of democracy. See the new standards, Section IV.

2. This requires study of the most basic values and principals of American democracy. See the new standards, Section II.

3. The new National Standards suggest that students must be able to undertake thoughtful and tolerant discourse regarding American politics. See the new standards, Section V.

6. Delegate tasks.
7. Involve the community.
8. Enlist parents/volunteers.
9. Commit celebrities.
10. Invite the public.
11. Contact the media.
12. Hold the forum.
13. Thank the participants.

1. Research issues and candidates.

Newspapers, magazines, television, and radio are ideal information sources for an upcoming election. Campaign materials can also be useful. (Also see the mock election's Web site page located at <http://www.nationalmockelection.org>.) A useful way to focus students is to have them create a weekly notebook of newspaper clippings that summarize and analyze election-related events. Students can also make cartoons depicting their views of the candidates and issues.

2. Determine the scope of your forum.

How many issues or candidates do you want to cover? How much time will be allotted to each? If you limit the issues and/or number of candidates, a forum might be held in a regular classroom during a regular class period. However, a large slate of candidates/issues will require a longer, more complex meeting in a larger setting.

At this stage it is helpful to encourage students to form small groups, with one student in each group taking notes, and brainstorm the nature of a successful forum and what is necessary to accomplish a successful forum. This technique will reveal issues you might not think of otherwise.

Most likely you will need a moderator to keep the event equitable and on task. To locate potential moderators, contact resources such as school faculty members, the League of Women Voters, staff members of local colleges or universities, local TV and radio stations, and newspapers.

If a student panel is to ask the questions, the composition, selection, and preparation of that panel is paramount. If questions are to be taken from the

floor, then an orderly process has to be pre-determined and implemented. Consider logistical questions, such as: "Where will the candidates, students, audience, and moderator sit?"; "How much time will be allotted to statements, questions, and answers?"; and "What will be the physical layout of furniture, sound equipment, microphones, and lighting?"

3. Pick a date.

Before choosing a date, consult others about potential dates for the issues forum to minimize conflicts with other community or school events. You may also wish to pass a list of possible dates by any special guests you wish to invite, such as candidates or a moderator, and select a date that is most convenient to all participants.

Once you have set the date, it becomes the target for all preparation and planning. Like an election or a military campaign, a successful school forum requires that certain things happen in a particular order at a specified time to reach the desired outcome. The key to this is to create a schedule by working backward from the date you plan to hold the forum.

A useful tool at this stage is a large desk calendar that has space for notes around each date. Mark down important dates (such as meetings and rehearsals) leading up to your forum on the calendar and display it where your students can refer to it. If necessary, keep one for yourself as a backup.

4. Pick a place.

Will you host your event in a public or private institution such as a school auditorium, gymnasium, large classroom, shopping mall, public library, federal building, college or university, or a corporate building? Many facilities are available for modest fees or for free as a public service. Restroom availability, refreshments, parking, access to good public transportation and a location central to your target audience are other important considerations. You may also wish to consider a hospitality room (near the facility for your event) for special guests, such as candidates and their staffs.

5. Assess your resources.

Resources are anything you can use to accomplish your goal. In a school forum, paper and pencils may be more important than sophisticated computers with electronic presentation devices. (Above all, the most important resources are the people resources—your students—who will plan, prepare, work, facilitate, and ultimately learn from the experience.) When making a list of resources, ask yourself: “What are we trying to do and what do we need to do it?”

Examples of resources include: money, office supplies of all types, copying equipment, faxes, telephones, cellular phones, computers/word processing machines, E-mail, U.S. Mail, internal distribution systems (such as school mail and/or office boxes), video cameras, VCRs, televisions, public address systems, two-way radios, recorders, community spaces (such as cafeterias, meeting rooms, auditoriums), lecterns, tables, chairs, stages, podiums, access to restrooms, and refreshments. The tools you use may be as much a matter of appropriateness as availability. For example, a box of index cards may be just as effective as a computer data base for keeping track of guests.

When accessing resources, you may need to rely on others not otherwise connected with your forum (a building manager, a sound technician, etc.). It is useful to contact and develop a relationship with these people early in the process to ensure that your forum will run smoothly.

6. Delegate tasks.

You can’t do all that needs to be done by yourself. Think of yourself as a shepherd. You are trying to move a group of people toward a common goal. Divide your class into small groups and assign tasks. Solicit help from not only your students, but from outside resources such as fellow teachers, parents, your administration, the media, building security and custodians.

Student groups could be organized to take charge of the following tasks:

- ★ researching the issues to be discussed
- ★ contacting and inviting participants
- ★ contacting the media
- ★ working with community members and organizations
- ★ coordinating volunteers at the event
- ★ thanking participants

As you delegate tasks, encourage students to aggressively follow up with their assignments. If a group sends a fax or mails press releases to the media, for example, have them follow up with phone calls. If a group is responsible for reserving a location, make sure they call to confirm or receive a written confirmation. Point out that most of what you are attempting to do requires communicating clearly and as often as possible to the people you expect to respond and participate.

7. Involve the community.

Community involvement can make your forum a media event. Volunteers from civic groups such as the League of Women Voters, a neighborhood group, the PTA/PTSA, a local civic club, and the Optimists can mean sponsorship of, participation in, and community/media recognition for your forum.

If you have a budget, consider placing ads for your event in neighborhood publications such as newspapers, newsletters, the school paper or on local radio. In the absence of money, you must rely on networking, press releases, and public service announcements. Handbills and posters can be highly effective (and organized by students). Many places and organizations have bulletin boards, both electronic and traditional, where your event can be posted. (Chapter 4 of this guide has more detailed information about involving the media in mock election events.)

8. Enlist parents/volunteers.

Parents and volunteers are invaluable resources because many have community contacts and because they represent a bridge to the real world that can make your forum relevant to your students. Invite parents to assist and attend. Because parents are taxpayers and voters they may be very good at making up questions for the forum. Teachers in your vertical team (feeder/receiver schools) or other area schools can also be asked to take part. You may simply wish to invite them as members of the community, or ask them to assist in such ways as keeping lists for each school, giving extra credit to students who attend from those schools, or organizing students from other schools to participate on the panel. You could also ask a local college or university instructor and/or organization to participate.

9. Commit celebrities.

Contact candidates as early as possible as their calendars fill quickly as election day approaches. Inform candidates (or their staffs) that they can reach voters at your forum and invite them to bring election materials to distribute to the public. If you get a commitment from a candidate, contact that candidate's opposition and invite him or her to present his or her views on the issues. (It is essential that all candidates and sides of the issue be represented in some way at your forum.) If there are a number of candidates for different offices or issues to be discussed, assign each candidate/issue a time slot. Remember to schedule the arrival of candidates/spokespersons within the appropriate slots, as people with busy itineraries may not have time to attend the entire event.

10. Invite the public.

The more you connect your forum to the larger community beyond your classroom and the school, the more involved your students are likely to become and the more they will learn. If you are conducting a candidate or issues forum connected to an upcoming election, consider an invitation list that includes students, parents, community members, the PTSA/PTA, the school staff, civic organizations, and of course, the candidates, their stand-ins, and knowledgeable spokespersons on the issues. Invitations can be sent out via fax, E-mail, U.S. Post, school mail, internal distribution, telephone, paid advertising in newspapers, school papers, radio, TV, handbills, PSAs (public service announcements), and press stories about the event.

11. Contact the media.

Getting media coverage for your forum is a matter of identifying the media, obtaining telephone/fax numbers and addresses, and making contact early and often. The Yellow Pages are a useful source of media telephone numbers, but your school district or city public information office (PIO) may have a media list for press releases and public service announcements (PSA). The school district's PIO can be extremely helpful in these matters.

Once you have determined the time, date, and place of your forum and gotten commitment from the major participants, you can begin contacting the press. If your students, parents or other volunteers know people in the media field, ask them if you can use their contacts. (See Chapter 4: Involving Print and Electronic Media.)

12. Hold the forum.

Students took on a variety of tasks at the planning stage, and they'll also need to be assigned specific tasks for the event itself. You most certainly will want greeters, hosts, and hostesses for the public and the celebrities, and recorders to keep track of sign-in lists and hand out name tags (something else students can prepare). You will need time-keepers to assist the moderator and candidates with predetermined, agreed-to time limits. Student cameramen and interviewers can film interviews with candidates and/or spokespeople and make follow-up tapes for your classroom. (This is a wonderful educational experience for the camera operator(s) as well as the interviewer(s).) A student photographer can also be employed. The school/school district may also have television facilities to record and broadcast your forum. The key here is enlisting these resources early in the preparation.

If you have a place such as a table, shelf or another place accessible to the public, suggest that the various campaigns bring campaign materials for the public. Make sure this information is conveyed to both the public and the campaigns. A student may be assigned to this task.

13. Thank the participants.

Many people will have contributed to your school forum by the time it is completed. Having students send thank-you notes, letters, or faxes to those who helped with its success brings home the scope of their accomplishments and helps them reflect on what they have learned. (You may have already assigned a student committee to attend to this function.)

Throughout the process, keep in mind that a successful forum is one that involves your students in its planning, promotion, and production. Hands-on learning makes students stakeholders in the outcome. Because modern society is media-driven, the rules of McLuhan's Global Village apply, "Electronic media, the media of our time is an extension of the central nervous system. Today's youth understands this instinctively and lives it mythically and in depth." (*The Medium is the Message*) Generally speaking, the more you connect your event with the outside world, the better your chances for success. If you can produce a media event, a well-attended community function with lots of human interaction that receives recognition from within the school and beyond, and your students feel they had a major role in accomplishing this end, you will have had a successful forum. They, in turn, will learn skills they can never get out of books.